A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting': A report prepared for the NSPCC

Aims

This small-scale qualitative study was exploratory in nature and aimed to provide in-depth understandings about the complex nature of sexting and what role mobile technologies play in teenagers' peer networks.

Key Findings

- The primary technology-related threat is not the 'stranger danger' hyped by the mass media but technology-mediated sexual pressure from their peers. The problems posed by sexting come from known peers, thus rendering much commonplace advice on e-safety beside the point.

- The phenomenon understood as sexting does not refer to a single activity but rather to a range of activities which may be motivated by sexual pleasure but are often coercive, linked to harassment, bullying and even violence.

- Sexting is not a gender-neutral practice, but shaped by the gender dynamics of the peer group in which, primarily, boys harass girls, and is exacerbated by gendered norms and double standard. There are gender specific risks where girls are unable to openly speak about sexual activities and practices, while boys are at risk of peer exclusion if they do not brag about sexual experiences.

- The specific features or affordances of communication technologies amplify the problem. Girls are objectified via the creation, exchange, collection, ranking and display of sexual images.

- Most children interviewed were familiar with the practices referred to as sexting. Most felt in some ways oppressed by perceived sexual pressure – to perform, judge and be judged – from peers.

- Although the year 10 teenagers interviewed were more sexually aware and experienced, they also appeared more mature in their resilience and ability to cope. The year 8 children were more worried confused and, in some cases, upset by the sexual and sexting pressures they face, and their very youth meant that parents, teachers and others did not support them sufficiently.

- Sexting practices are culturally specific. Sexting for girls can involve being subject to oppressive, racialised beauty norms and hierarchies around feminine appearance and body ideals. Boys must negotiate competitive masculinity, where status can be generated in new ways via technology.

Policy Context

There has been considerable public anxiety and media hyperbole regarding the nature of 'sexting' practices via mobile phones and internet among teenagers. Yet teachers, parents, industry and child-welfare professionals have often been at a loss as to understand these practices in terms of their incidence, nature or consequences. This project was designed to develop initial evidence-based recommendations to a range of stakeholders.

Methodology

In this small-scale qualitative study, single-sex focus group interviews were conducted with 35 young people in years 8 and 10 in two inner city schools in London. Both schools have students from diverse ethnic and SES backgrounds. An online ethnography was conducted with 31 participants who accepted the researchers' friending requests on Facebook, from which a further 22 students were selected from the focus groups for individual interviews. Four key teachers and staff at schools were also interviewed.

Source

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/resourcesforprofessionals/sexualabuse/sexting-research_wda89260.html
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